

# Front-end Evaluation

## FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

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The following is a report based on the four Focus Groups conducted at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Visitor Center in Atlanta, Georgia, on October 16 and 17, 1998. The groups consisted of two local Junior High School groups, one all-black and the other mixed black and white (17 in each group, mixed gender). The third group consisted of 8 Junior High School teachers and the fourth group consisted of 10 adults recruited from visitors who were at the Center.

A Focus Group protocol previously prepared was used to guide each discussion. All sessions lasted approximately one hour and were tape-recorded. The salient comments from each group are presented first, followed by a summary of what I believe to be the findings most useful to the exhibit development process.

### Student GROUP #1:

Responses to question about how life would be different for young African Americans growing up in the 30s were almost exclusively devoted to non-civil rights matters, such as different clothing, music, technology, hair styles., etc. However, two responses were related to the central issue, transportation ("Could not go where you wanted to go.") and education ("Could not learn the way you wanted to.").

However, when asked what things they associate with the civil rights movement, they were quick to note a number of important items:

- March for equal rights
- Segregation
- Black people fighting and dying for their rights
- Non-violence
- Restrictions on where you could go
- Boycotts and sit-ins

The only names given that they associated with the CR movement were Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks.

One girl wanted to make a special point of the fact that "non-violence" was only practiced by those supporting the CR movement, not those who were opposed to it. This was followed by noting the importance of the teachings of Gandhi and his influence on Martin Luther King, Jr.

Most of the group seemed to have a clear notion of the time period when the CR movement was at its most active.

When asked if the CR movement has met its goals and is no longer needed, a very loud "NO" filled the room. When asked what some of the current issues and unfinished business might be, a rather long list of answers was given, which can be summarized in a couple of key points:

- Blacks are still treated like criminals just because of the color of their skin (several noted this in the context of their treatment in various places of business).

There is still lots of white prejudice against blacks, but some people will never change the way they think no matter what we do. Prejudice is based on ignorance, which is often passed on from parents to children.

Many schools are still segregated in practice, and they do not get the resources they need and deserve.

What was especially interesting in these comments was the number of them that pointed to problems that exist within the black community itself:

Black on black crime.

Blacks not wanting to get a good education and not taking advantage of the opportunities now open to them.

Blacks not taking an active or leadership role in public affairs.

Blacks not voting.

The last item led me to wonder why this is so, which led to one answer that if you register to vote you get on the list for jury duty. I did not follow up on this point, but one might guess it might be related to not wanting to get involved in anything connected with the criminal justice system. (Just a guess!) The other answer was that there is no black person running for President.

However, others in the group were clear about the importance of voting - "If you don't vote you shouldn't complain." That the lack of black candidates may be related to the lack of black voters seemed to be understood by at least some in this group.

The question about the role of young people in the CR movement also generated a large number of responses that were focused on two basic areas:

Big role in school desegregation.

Big role in the various marches and demonstrations.

It was also noted that this was not exclusively a black role, but that many white young people were active as well.

A separate and lively discussion grew out of this topic having to do with the way blacks were portrayed in the media as being "dumb and ugly," even though it was pointed out that "many important inventions were made by black people."

The role of churches and religion in the CR movement was readily acknowledged by many in the group. Interestingly, the importance of music came up, noting how the signing of hymns and spirituals often accompanied marches, sit-ins, etc.

When asked whether or not they talked about race and CR issues with parents or other adults, the response was rather weak. However, several of them told stories about things that happened to adult members of their family that had racial implications (being arrested for no reason, being abused by the police, etc.). One might wonder if it is only when there is a significant and negative event is there any discussion related to race.

The critical question on "what can you do to improve relations between the races" generated some interesting answers:

Help others stay out of trouble.

Stay out of trouble ourselves - blacks are often part of the problem.

Take more advantage of the opportunities we have. (Several variations given on this theme.)

Do the things that we know are right and ignore the ignorance of white people.

Don't shop at stores that don't treat you right.

Stand up for what you believe in.

Stay in contact with CR leaders and members of Congress.

With the exception of the last item, these answers reflect a personal and individual way of dealing with the problems they face. This is not unrelated to the voting issue, and suggests that trying to work with "the system" is not being seriously considered by these young people.

The final topic had to do with ideas for an exhibit on the issues we had been talking about. This generated the most active and energetic (and creative) discussion of the entire session. To capture this adequately I will cover most of the responses as they were given:

Lots of hands-on stuff.

Things you can touch - like dolls. Short films - like cartoons.

Problem-solving tasks - show a CR event on video and ask what they would do and then show what actually happened.

Could have a bridge to cross with "virtual reality" dogs, police, fire trucks on the other side, and ask what they would do. Keep the exhibit simple so children can understand it.

Have a live story teller to relate real events - Rosa parks for example.

Its good to have a school assignment related to the exhibit so you have things to find out.

Pick from several endings of an event and then show real one.

Matching games using pictures.

Pictures are good to get your interest so you will want to read the text about what happened. (Holocaust museum used as good example.) Have a live skit about some important event, like getting on a bus and not sitting in the back.

This discussion could have gone on much longer but time ran out. However, I think that the "message" that this group wanted to convey vis-a-vis an effective exhibit came through loud and clear!

### **Student Group #2:**

The "life in the 30s" questions generated a richer set of answers than was given by the first group:

Separate parks and bathrooms for blacks and just about everywhere you went it was like that. Called segregation.

We couldn't vote - we were very limited in the things we could do.

We were like the Jews in Nazi Germany in the way we were treated.

There were different entrances for blacks like in the movies. We would have to sit in different sections like the back or the balcony. We didn't get good seats.

We could not get good jobs then. Now we can because of affirmative action.

The schools were separate and not as good - not like we have now.

Actually, the balcony is not that bad to sit in - you can see good from there. But we should not have to sit there.

We were not treated fairly by the justice system and the laws.

(Several variations on this theme were given.)

Public facilities - rest rooms and water fountains were separate. The whites had newer and better ones than we did.

Blacks would have to sit in the back of buses.

Black customers could not get the same service in stores. If a black person wanted to try on a hat they would make you put a plastic cover over your head.

If a black kid beat up a white kid he might be sent to jail or hung, but not the other way around.

Blacks and whites did not date each other then like they do now. White parents discouraged their children from associating with black children.

What names of people, places, events do you associate with the CR movement:

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. They never gave up. (Many repeats on these two names.)

Sit-ins and boycotts.

Civil rights is really about human or equal rights. Gandhi was a model.

Determination - they did not want to walk instead of ride on the buses but they knew they had to.

I think of how many people would go to so much trouble just to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak.

The South was where most of the problems were.

I asked if any names other than King and Parks come to mind and got Malcome X, Frederick Douglass and Andrew Young. CR places came up with Alabama, Montgomery, Selma and Washington, D.C. One student said that he does not think of places but he thinks of all the children who protested in the movement.

This comment led me to the next area, namely the role of young people in the CR movement. The responses were numerous and show clear awareness of this important element in the CR movement. The key ones are:

They went places and did things even though they were not wanted.

They did it anyway.

They took part in demonstrations even though their parents may not want them to.

They went into white high schools even though the white kids wanted to keep them out.

They were in the movement even if their parents were against it. They were more mature than their parents. Also, there were white children who were helping as well.

It was very dangerous to do what they did but they did not fight back. This was called non-violence and King learned this from Gandhi.

There was a lot of danger involved from things like mace and German Shepherd dogs.

What role did churches and religion play in the CR movement?

They served as meeting places for many of the marches.

The leaders mostly came out of different churches.  
Religion gave the CR movement its spiritual support.  
CR leaders were also religious leaders.  
The KKK tried to use religion to support their work against CR. Used  
the burning of crosses to symbolize this and then they burned  
churches.  
Going to church and singing hymns gave black people courage to  
continue on against racial injustice.

This group agreed that we had not by any means solved all our racial problems, and  
noted some specific examples to support this fact:

KKK still active in some areas of the country.

Three white boys dragged a black man behind their truck.

There are always going to be people who are racist and prejudiced and  
there is no way you can stop that. You can't make them respect other  
kinds of people.

Members of my own family are pretty much still racially prejudiced.  
Call blacks ugly names.

Do you ever talk about race issues with members of your family or other adults?

My grandmother has told me stories about when she was a young girl and  
some of the things that happened to her from white people.  
I'm okay talking about it - like when I see a movie and want to talk  
about what I saw.

When we took a bus trip to Wash. and we had a problem on the bus about  
who should sit where coming back. (Remember, this is a racially  
mixed class.) We were not very good at talking about it  
then. We spent 4 hours talking about it - it was NOT a good  
experience. (This comment generated a lively discussion about what  
"really" happened and provided a "real time" example of how  
difficult it is to deal with issues of this kind even today. This  
discussion was very "civilized" but I think there were deeper  
feelings that were not being expressed.)

Were racial and CR matters covered in your classes at school in the various grades?

Not really. Its skipped over.

I had a white teacher in 4th grade who didn't like to talk about such  
things. She always gave the white students better grades than the  
black students even when they didn't deserve it. She claimed that  
the black students were always disrupting the class.  
I had a hard time in 3rd grade where a was picked on by a white girl.

What role can young people play in civil rights today?

Speak out, have meetings, and talk. Get people to listen to children  
and get their ideas and perspectives. Let them know how we would  
like it to change and speak our minds about it. We could do these  
things but it doesn't really happen now. These problems are a part  
of our history and they need to stop. We could also talk to teachers  
and others leaders.  
If your parents are racist you should try to talk to them about it.

You should do the best you can and not let yourself be put down by others.

When you are a parent teach your children right from wrong. Be a kind of role model.

When you see or hear something wrong speak up about it. Express your opinion.

Everybody needs to help solve these problems - white and black.

You have to do it yourself if you want

anything to be done. You

should E-mail to the mayor if you want to get results. You can't expect others to do it for you.

In our school all the black students stay together and all the white students stay together. If I would hang out with white people the blacks would call me a white girl.

The football team in our school is all black except for one person and the soccer team is almost all white.

What would make an effective exhibit in the subjects we have been talking about?

Show what led up to the way things are now.

Show what really went on back then in a realistic way. We have ideas about what went on but we don't really know.

Use pictures to show comparisons between the past and now. Have real things and models like the CR museum in Birmingham. Have actors that would act out what it was like say in a classroom for blacks back in the early days.

Use of color to get the full picture. Black and white pictures you don't get the full image.

Don't make us write down a lot of boring things for our school assignments.

Interviews with people who have experiences. If you can't get the real people you could put them on video.

Make it hands-on so you can remember it. Just reading is not as good.

You get on the buss and the teacher asks you what you learned and you can't remember what you read, but if you could feel like you were actually there and be in that persons position you would remember it.

Put yourself in the persons position you are talking about. Have like a tunnel that you walk through that shown how things changed through the years. Like you are walking with other people. Have real people acting out roles of CR leaders.

Make it real like the Holocaust Museum in Wash. where they had actual objects from that period.

Have a computer game where you have to make choices.

A virtual reality device where you are actually the person having

the experience like a black child marching or you could choose from other things like that.

The more real the exhibit is the more likely it is that I would be taking an active role in trying to do something about it. I would feel what it is like rather than just reading about it.

Show the bad things not just people marching but those who were against them.

You must show both sides of the issue and not just the bad stuff or the exhibit will be too negative.

## Teachers Group

(These teachers taught music, special ed, language arts (2), math., social studies (2), and life science. None of them teach a unit on CR and only a few of them ever used an exhibit as an adjunct to their classroom lessons. One male teacher.)

The discussion started on the subject of what is being taught now in the middle schools in Atlanta about CR history and related issues. Is this subject covered adequately.

(Several NOs were uttered.)

6th and 7th grades in Atlanta cover world geography, which is a very big subject. CR kinds of things would have to be worked in around those topics. Not really given separate attention. 8th grader get Georgia history so it would fit better within their curriculum. Students get this subject in their elementary level grades.

(Music teacher.) I work the subject into my classes around the role of music in the CR movement (hymns and spirituals). Even rap music today plays a role for young people.

Two years ago my class did a unit on the CR movement and the city of Atlanta where we actually toured this area. But we had to piece together the materials to do this - there were no organized materials we could use. The historic sites are great but putting together a program for using them was difficult.

The exhibit should highlight the events and places in Atlanta that were so important to the history of the CR movement. Where were the pockets of segregation, what happened when this area here became industrialized, where did the blacks go? How were and are neighborhoods in Atlanta affected by the waves of segregation and then desegregation. What happened to the businesses in the Sweet Auburn area, where did they go when the area changed? Children need to understand what happens when things break down and how relocation affects neighborhoods. I heard that Atlanta has the highest rate of minority migration of any city in the South, and not just black people.

Kids pick up information about CR from lots of sources not just in school.

Kids don't have a sense of what some of the real problems were before, like sitting in the back of the bus. It would be good if in the exhibit you could have them actually experience what it is like to have to do that, or not be able to use other things available to whites.

Just walking over the bridge in the exhibit here really gets to me, especially hearing the music at the same time. I felt that! That is the kind of thing that would reach the children.

It would be good to have the exhibit deal with things that are not well known. Some things about the CR movement everybody knows like MLK, and certain places and events.

When I take a class to an exhibit I want them to be able to get the point at a glance and to relieve me of as much preparation as possible. Like affirmative action - when was it passed, where is it a law now, what are the problems with it now. Voting rights - who died so we could vote. I want it to be historical but I also want it to say what is happening NOW.

In my school we have a very mixed ethnic group, Spanish, oriental, etc. as well as black. The exhibit must say something to them as well.

## Adult Group.

(Mostly black and female. All but one with young children. Half from "out-of-town.")

What kinds of things do you think children would like in an exhibit about the ('R movement?

I liked very much what they did at the Holocaust museum in DC where you got a passport of a real person and followed what happened to them. That made the experience very meaningful.  
Kids really like hands-on things that they can relate to.  
Also interactive exhibits are good.  
Make the exhibit personal - relate to them.

How about a live presentation. E.g., someone could play Rosa Parks. Set up a video image of a person like a grandfather talking to a young person about what it was like in "those days."  
You could have a screen behind a person and video tape a scene where the person is participating in an CR even. The person becomes part of the exhibit. You could have different stories or endings and then show what really happened.

How about interviewing young people and getting their opinions and real experiences about various subjects. You could even do this "live" at the exhibit and make it a part of the display. Maybe change it every week or so.

Show them where you could go and where you could not go in the 50s and 60s. We know about this sort of thing but the kids today do not realize it. Even the newspapers showed jobs as "White Only" and "Black Only."



**SALIENT FINDINGS  
and  
NEXT STEPS**

The comments above contain a wealth of material that deserves careful consideration, both from a practical and a more conceptual point of view. I would suggest that a close reading with a red pencil would yield any number of ideas that should not be lost as the exhibit design moves closer and closer to its final form. In fact, this would make an interesting exercise for several persons to carry out and then compare notes. I would be happy to do this myself and to join in a group discussion to see what can be done to take maximum advantage of the finding.

Here are my own preliminary thoughts on what some of the major "messages" are that seem to come through "loud and clear:"

- Knowledge of many of the important elements of the CR movement is at a fairly high level among our target audience. They know many of the key names, events and places.
- Knowledge of what it was like to live in the period before the CR movement is also fairly well supported.
- Awareness of the fact that there are many CR related issues yet to be dealt with adequately is high. Many see these more clearly as human rights issues and not just in terms of racial issues.
- Blacks are not against pointing out problems in their own community that make their advancement more problematic than it should be - e.g., black-on-black crime and failure to take advantage of the opportunities they now have, especially in education.
- An exhibit on this subject must relate to the children at a very personal and direct level, with real-world examples they can identify with.
- The more interactive and hands-on activities there are that are relevant to the subject matter, the more the exhibit will be attended to. Problem solving and game-like activities were noted often in this context.
- Awareness of the possible roles and actions of young people today in dealing with current CR issues tended to center on personal behavior. In this context, the fight for voting rights and the low percentage of black voters today would represent an interesting story to tell with implications for "what I can do to advance our rights."
- The use of images of young people within the exhibit itself would increase interest e.g., interviews with people their own age about experiences they have had, both positive and negative.
- Being able to "experience" some of the traumatic and dangerous events that young persons went through in marches, buses, lunch counters, etc. would be very effective through the use of games, videos, problem solving activities, etc. (Virtual reality was noted often in this context.)

- Music was mentioned a few times and should not be forgotten as a potentially useful and attractive element in the exhibit.
- Real objects came up often in the discussion as having a powerful attraction for young people (and "old" as well).

I am confident, based on the inputs from all four groups, that we are on the right track. However, the notion of "focus" needs to be emphasized and remembered. The closer the exhibit can stick to its major well-defined messages the better it will succeed in conveying any messages. I think we ought to refine the stated objectives (I would call them "goals") and make them more specific so that we can avoid trying to do too many things. I would be happy to assist in this activity, since I will be the one who needs to ask the right questions when we do our summative evaluation!